LEO STRAUSS

September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973

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ON OCTOBER 18, 1973, LEO STRAUSS died in Annapolis, Maryland. He was one of the very small number of men whose thought has had seminal influence in political theory in our time. He published thirteen books during his life (with at least two more volumes to come) and over eighty articles, and he left behind several generations of unusually devoted students. It is particularly difficult to speak of him, for I know I cannot do him justice. Moreover, those of us who knew him saw in him such a power of mind, such a unity and purpose of life, such a rare mixture of the human elements resulting in a harmonious expression of the virtues, moral and intellectual, that our account of him is likely to evoke disbelief or ridicule from those who have never experienced a man of this quality. Finally, Leo Strauss left his own memorial in the body of his works in which what he understood to be his essence lives on; and, above all, he was dedicated to intransigent seriousness as opposed to popularization. But an inner need to pay him tribute and a kind of filial piety urge me on in spite of the persuasiveness of the reasons that restrain me.

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I

The story of a life in which the only real events were thoughts is easily told. Leo Strauss was born on September 20, 1899, in Kirchhain, Hessen, Germany. He was raised as an orthodox Jew and had a gymnasium education. He studied at the universities of Marburg and Hamburg, and he spent a part-doctoral year at Freibourg, where Husserl was the professor of philosophy and the young Heidegger was his assistant. From there Strauss went to Berlin and held a position at the Academy of Jewish Research. In 1932, he received a Rockefeller grant and left Germany, never to return except for a few short days more than twenty years later. He lived in Paris and Cambridge until 1938, when he came to the United States. He taught at the New School for Social Research until 1949, at the University of Chicago from which he retired in 1968 as the Robert M. Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science, at Claremont Men's College and at St. John's College in Annapolis. He knew many interesting men and spent much time talking to students, but the core of his being was the solitary, continuous, meticulous study of the questions he believed most important. His conversation was the result or the continuation of this activity. His passion for his work was unremitting, austere, but full of joy; he felt that he was not alive when he was not thinking, and only the gravest mishaps could cause him to cease doing so. Although he was unfailingly polite and generous with his time, one always knew that he had something more important to do. He was active in no organization, served in no position of authority, and had no ambitions other than to understand and help others who might also be able to do so. He was neither daunted nor corroded by neglect or hostility.

There is nothing in his biography that explains his thought, but it is to be noted that he was born a Jew in that country where Jews cherished the greatest secular hopes and suffered the most terrible persecutions, and that he studied philosophy in that country the language of which had been almost identical with that of philosophy for 150 years and whose most profound philosophic figure of this century was a Nazi. Thus, Strauss had before him the spectacle of the political extremes and their connection with modern philosophy. He was forced to grapple with the theological-political problem at a time when it was most fashionable to ignore it or think it solved. He certainly believed that any man who is to live a serious life has to face these questions; he devoted his own life not to preaching answers to them but to clarifying them when their outlines had become obscure. His beginning point was a peculiarly favorable one for approaching the permanent questions.

Leo Strauss was a most controversial man, and his works have not received their due measure of recognition. By calling into question the presuppositions of modern scholarship as well as much of its result, he offended many scholars committed to its method and the current interpretation of the tradition. By speaking of natural right and the community founded on the *polis,* he angered the defenders of a certain orthodoxy which insisted that liberty is threatened by the consideration of these alternatives. By his critique of the fact-value distinction and the behavioral science which emerged from it, he aroused the indignation of many social scientists, because he seemed to be challenging both their scientific project and the vision of society subtly bound up with it. Philosophic doubt, the critical reflection on the horizon which seems self-evident, always evokes moral indignation, and Strauss was aware of it. But that doubt is requisite for the sake of inner freedom and for the sake of mitigating the excesses of our questionable principles. Strauss' scholarship was in the service of providing a standpoint from which sensible evaluation of our situation can be made, for alternative standards of evaluation are not easily accessible and without the search for them convention will always be criticized conventionally.

The criticisms of behavioralism that Strauss initiated became highly respectable as certain of the consequences of the new social science became evident; and some of those who had been most virulent in their criticism of his criticism shifted with the new currents, without recantation. Strauss' study of social science is an excellent example of the cast of his mind and the way in which he proceeded. His attachment to the American regime was deep. He studied its history and was charmed by its particular genius. Practically, he was grateful for the refuge it gave him, and he was aware that the liberal democracies are the surest friends of his people. From both experience and study, he knew that liberal democracy is the only decent and just alternative available to modern man. But he also knew that liberal democracy is exposed to, not to say beleaguered by, threats both practical and theoretical. Among those threats is the aspect of modern philosophy that makes it impossible to give rational credence to the principles of the American regime, thereby eroding conviction of the justice of its cause. The new social science was in Leo Strauss' early years in America the powerful form in which modern, particularly German, philosophy was expressing itself in North America. I do not believe that he took the new social science to be a very important intellectual movement. There was, and is, a tremendous disproportion between its claims and its achievements, and it is not possessed of a serious understanding of its own

intellectual roots. To spend time on it took Strauss away from his central concerns. But he regarded it as his duty to have a careful look at it, because it was here and influential, and because it was always his way to ascend from popular opinion to more adequate formulations of problems, to take seriously what men say and try to see what there is in it. This was not only a form of civility, although it was that: he believed that in men's opinions is to be found the access to knowledge of the ways things really are. Only by the careful and painstaking attempt to understand our own situation can one move beyond it while avoiding doctrinairism and abstraction. Strauss' way of approaching social science was not to engage in continuing polemics or to make accusations concerning subversive motives. Nor was it to take the ordinary productions of the discipline and make the easy rhetorical refutation, although severe moral responsibility made him read almost all the literature. Rather, he looked for those thinkers who were agreed to possess the best minds and whose works inspired the movement. Moreover, as he always did, he looked to the origins, because there the arguments for a position are usually made more seriously than later when they are already victorious and have the self-evidence which attaches to success, and because there one can find the alternative perspective which has been overwhelmed by the new one. In particular, Strauss looked to Max Weber, whom he studied thoroughly and respectfully. He carried on a dialogue with him. One of the important conclusions of that dialogue was that the fact-value distinction, which although very new had come to dominate moral discourse, needed stronger philosophic grounding if it was to be taken as a fundamental category of the mind. Strauss recognized the seriousness and nobility of Max Weber's mind, but he showed that he was a derivative thinker, standing somewhere between modern science and Nietzsche, unable to resolve their tension. Thus, Strauss opened up a world of reflection on the sense of the word *value* and the reasonableness of substituting it for words like good and bad and pointed the way to profounder reflection on what is of the most immediate concern to all men of our generation.

This was one of the sources of his great appeal to students. He began where they began and showed them that they had not reflected on the presuppositions of their science or their politics and that these presuppositions had been reflected on by great men whom we have for all practical purposes forgotten how to read. The study of those thinkers became both a necessity and a delight. This was Leo Strauss' only rhetoric. Moreover, the critique of the principles of social science was accompanied by an effort to look at political things as they first come to sight, to rediscover

the phenomena which were transformed or reduced by the new methods. Strauss was dedicated to the restoration of a rich and concrete natural consciousness of the political phenomenon. His truly astonishing clarity and freshness in describing the things around us came in large measure from the way he used old books to liberate himself from the categories which bind us.

When Leo Strauss came to America, the most advanced political scientists asserted that they could dispense with political philosophy as physics had dispensed with metaphysics. Now, it can be safely said, there is more hesitation about that assertion.

II

Leo Strauss was a philosopher. He would have never said so himself, for he was too modest and he had too much reverence for the rare human type and the way of life represented by that title to arrogate it to himself, especially in an age when its use has been so cheapened. My assertion is particularly paradoxical, inasmuch as Strauss appears emphatically to be only a scholar. The titles of his books are typically *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* or *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, and those with titles like *Natural Right and History* or *The City and Man* prove to be but reflections on more than one old philosopher. Strauss merges with the authors he discussed and can be understood to be nothing more than their interpreter. Moreover, while philosophers today speak only of being and knowledge, Strauss spoke of cities and gentlemen.

But appearances can be deceiving, particularly when our prejudices are in part responsible for them. A survey of Strauss' entire body of work will reveal that it constitutes a unified and continuous, ever deepening, investigation into the meaning and possibility of philosophy It is the product of a philosophic life devoted to an understanding of the philosophic life at a time when philosophy can no longer give an account of itself and the most modern philosophers have abandoned reason, and hence philosophy, in favor of will or commitment. It is an investigation carried on in light of the seriousness of the objections and their proponents. Strauss did not give way to the modern movement, yet neither could he devote himself to science without facing that movement. He studied the reasons for the abandonment of reason reasonably, which means that he had to test the contemporary assertions about the character of philosophy and the need for a new mode of philosophy against the old

philosophy. And that old philosophy is no longer immediately accessible to us, for it is seen through a tradition which does not take its claim to truth seriously. An effort of recovery was necessary, one rendered unusually difficult by the fact that we no longer possess the equipment with which to see ourselves through the eyes of earlier philosophers rather than seeing them through ours. Our categories are inherited, questionable; they determine our horizons. Recovery means discovery, and Leo Strauss embarked on a voyage of discovery in what was thought to be familiar terrain: the tradition of philosophy. He had to throw away the maps and the compass which were made on the basis of principles alien to that tradition and which would have led him astray by causing him to pass by what was not charted. His writings were tentative but ever surer steps toward understanding writers as they understood themselves and thereby toward making the fundamental alternatives again clear to men whose choices had become impoverished. He found a way to read so as to perceive again what philosophy originally meant. In his last writings, he finally felt free to try to grasp the way of Socrates, the archetype of the philosopher and the one whose teaching Nietzsche and Heidegger most of all tried to overthrow. Socrates came alive again in a reading of Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato, those writers who knew him and were captivated by him. In making the Socratic way plausible again, intransigently confronting all the objections subsequently made against it and all the ways opposed to it, Strauss believed he had accomplished the *apology* of rationalism and the life dedicated to the quest for the first causes of all things.

It is in this spirit and not as a reformer, a moralist, or a founder of a movement that Leo Strauss undertook the study of political philosophy His politics were the politics of philosophy and not the politics of a particular regime. Without forgetting being, he turned away from its contemplation to the contemplation of man—who is both the being capable of longing to know being and the most interesting of beings, the one which any teaching about being must most of all comprehend. To begin with the human things, to save them from reduction to the nonhuman, and to understand their distinctiveness, was the Socratic way To begin again from the natural beginning point is even more necessary today, when science more than ever is devoted to explaining man by what is not man and has thereby made it impossible to comprehend the source and instrument of that science, the soul. The world and man's mind have been transformed by science; thus, when science becomes questionable, it is peculiarly difficult to find the natural mind. Science rests on

pre-scientific foundations which are presupposed by science but which can no longer be seen by science. All thought that proceeds without a return to the pre-scientific world, a world not immediately available to us, is captive to contemporary beliefs. When Leo Strauss spoke of tyranny and gentlemen and natural right and statesmen and philosophers, he was always thinking of the problem of knowledge.

To restate all this in a somewhat different form, Leo Strauss' believed that the Platonic image of the cave described the essential human condition. All men begin, and most men end, as prisoners of the authoritative opinions of their time and place. Education is a liberation from those bonds, the ascent to a standpoint from which the cave can be seen for what it is. Socrates' assertion that he only knows that he is ignorant reveals that he has attained such a standpoint, one from which he can see that what others take to be knowledge is only opinion, opinion determined by the necessities of life in the cave. Philosophy, in all its various forms, always has supposed that by unaided reason man is somehow capable of getting beyond the given and finding a nonarbitrary standard against which to measure it and that this possibility constitutes the essence of human freedom. What Leo Strauss faced as a young man was the most radical denial of this possibility that had ever been made. The objection was not that of scepticism, a view that has always been present in the philosophic tradition, but the positive or dogmatic assertion that reason is incapable of finding permanent, nonarbitrary principles. All that was most powerful either implicitly or explicitly accepted the truth of this assertion. Kantianism, in its neo-Kantian fragments, had ceased to be plausible. What remained was positivism, which understood its principles to be unprovable and dependent on their usefulness, and radical historicism which went further by asserting that reason has its roots in unreason and is hence only a superficial phenomenon. It concluded that the positivists' principles, admittedly arbitrary, were the product of only one of an infinite number of possible perspectives, horizons, or folk minds. Heidegger, the modern thinker who most impressed Strauss, set to work to dismantle the Western traditional of rationalism in order to recover the rich sources out of which rationalism emerged but which had been covered over by it.

Now Strauss agreed that modern rationalism had indeed reached an impasse. What he was not sure of was whether the fate of reason itself was bound to that of modern philosophy It was the elaboration of this doubt that he set as his task. The single advantage of the total crisis of philosophy was that it permitted a total doubt of received philosophic

opinion that would have been considered impossible before. The belief, for example, that Kant had forever refuted the claims of ancient metaphysics became groundless. Everything was open. But such belief had fostered a forgetfulness of what ancient metaphysics was. We saw through Kant's eyes, whether we knew it or not, for even the philology which we use as a tool for the interpretation of ancient thought is based on modern philosophy. Thus, when Leo Strauss wrote a book entitled *Natural Right and History*, he was not primarily investigating the problem of justice, he was looking at the two great alternative standpoints beyond the cave–nature and history. Nature, and with it natural right, had been rejected as a standard in favor of history. Strauss dared to make that rejection, which was accepted as certain, a problem; and he did this by studying the perspective in which these standards come to light, political common sense. In short, Strauss returned to the cave. Its shadows had faded; but when one loses one's way, one must go back to the beginning, if one can.

III

But I have spoken too academically, and Leo Strauss' thought was never academic. It had its source in the real problems of a serious life. His intellectual odyssey began with his Zionism. Assimilation and Zionism were the two solutions to what was called "The Jewish problem." Zionism understood assimilation to be both impossible and demeaning. The establishment of a Jewish state was the only worthy and proud alternative. This formulation of the choice was predicated on the assumption that orthodox Judaism–the belief in the letter of Mosaic revelation and the acceptance of the fate of Jews in the Diaspora as part of Divine Providence to be changed only by the coming of the Messiah–is no longer tenable for thoughtful men. In fact, the situation of the Jews could only be looked on as a problem, requiring and susceptible of a solution, in the light of that assumption. "The Jewish Problem" was a child of the Enlightenment, with its contempt for revelation and its assurance that political problems, once posed as such, can be solved. Strauss, while accepting the Zionist view of assimilation, wondered whether a strictly political or secular response to the Jewish situation in Europe was sufficient and whether a Jewish state that rejected the faith in the Biblical revelation would have any meaning. Could the Jews become a nation like any other? And if they could, would that not be just a higher form of assimilation, of accepting the

undesirability of being Jewish? Strauss saw, moreover, that pious Jews who tried to salvage Judaism and respond to the philosophical denial of the claims of the Mosaic code tacitly accepted many of the premises of their adversaries and were no longer really orthodox. Unable to accept the facile and convenient solutions available, he turned to the examination of the great thinker who suggested both the alternatives, assimilation and a Jewish state, and who initiated the higher criticism of the Bible which appeared to make life lived in adherence to the written word foolish and which prevails to this day; he turned to the renegade Jew, to Spinoza. With this, his first serious scholarly undertaking, begun in his mid-twenties, Strauss embarked on the journey from which he never returned.

As it then appeared to Strauss,[1] Spinoza directed his criticism of the Jewish tradition against two kinds of men—the orthodox who believe in the divinely revealed character of every word of the Torah and for whom there was no need for, and a positive hostility toward, philosophy; and the philosophers, Maimonides in particular, who tried to show that reason and revelation are compatible, that Aristotelian philosophy arrived at by the unaided reason is in perfect harmony with and is perfected by the Mosaic revelation. Briefly, Strauss concluded that Spinoza's method of textual criticism was persuasive only insofar as one believed that the textual difficulties cannot be explained as miracles or as the result of supernatural and suprarational causes and that Spinoza gave no adequate proof of that belief. Hence, he found, in agreement with Pascal, that the strictest orthodoxy which refused any concession to philosophy could still be maintained. And he also concluded that he must study Maimonides, for he had to see whether it was a failure of reason that made this philosopher remain loyal to the Jewish people and its sacred book. For, unlike Pascal, he was not prepared to reject philosophy

So, Strauss turned to Maimonides. His first impression was bewilderment. It was not only that he could make no sense of it; he felt utterly alien to the manner of thought and speech. But it was always his instinct to look for something important in that which seemed trivial or absurd at first impression, for it is precisely by such an impression that our limitations are protected from challenge. These writings were distant from what he understood philosophy to be, but he could not accept the ready explanations based on abstractions about the medieval mind. He kept returning to Maimonides and also to the Islamic thinkers who preceded and inspired Maimonides. And gradually Strauss became aware that these medieval thinkers practised an art of writing forgotten by us, an art of writing with which they hid their intentions from all but a select few. He

had discovered esoteric writing. By the most careful readings, the texts become intelligible and coherent to rational men. This discovery, for which Strauss is famous and for which he is derided by those who established their reputations on conventional interpretations, may appear to be at best only an interesting historical fact, akin to learning how to read hieroglyphics. But it is fraught with philosophic significance, for the different mode of expression reflects a different understanding of reason and its relation to civil society. When one becomes aware of this, one is enabled to learn strange and wonderful things and to recognize the questionable character of our own view, to which we see no alternative. Out of this discovery emerged the great themes that dominated the rest of Strauss' life: Ancients and Moderns, and Athens and Jerusalem. Real radicalism is never the result of passionate commitment, but of quiet and serious reflection.

Strauss found that the harmony of reason and revelation was Maimonides' and Farabi's public teaching, while the private teaching was that there is a radical and irreducible tension between them; he found that the teachings of reason are wholly different from and incompatible with those of revelation and that neither side could completely refute the claims of the other but that a choice had to be made. This is, according to these teachers, the most important issue facing man. It turned out that the opposition between reason and revelation was no less extreme in Maimonides than in Spinoza and that Maimonides was no less rational than Spinoza. Strauss also later learned that Spinoza too recognized and used the classic art of writing. Wherein, then, did the difference lie? Put enigmatically, Spinoza no longer believed in the permanent necessity of that art of writing. His use of it was in the service of overcoming it. He thought it possible to rationalize religion and, along with it, civil society. Philosophy, instead of the secret preserve of a few who accept the impossibility of the many being philosophers, or truly tolerating it, could be the instrument of transforming society and bringing enlightenment. Maimonides' loyalty to the Jewish people may have been due less to his faith in the Bible than his doubt as to the possibility or desirability of depriving them of that faith. Spinoza, on the other hand, was a member of a conspiracy the project of which was the alteration of what were previously considered to be the necessary conditions of human life. This project required a totally different view of the nature of things, and it is the essence of modernity. It began in agreeing with the ancients that the primary issue is the religious question. With its success, its origins in this question disappeared from sight. Hence, to understand ourselves, we must

return to this origin and confront it with the view of things it replaced. Nietzsche, Strauss found, was wrong in his belief that there is a single line of Western rationalism originating in the ancients and culminating in contemporary science.

There was a great break somewhere in the sixteenth century. Nietzsche's critique of rationalism might well hold good for modern rationalism, but the character of ancient rationalism is unknown to us. A choice had been made by modern man, but whether that choice had led to broader horizons seen from a higher plateau is not clear.

Moreover, in his study of Maimonides and the Islamic thinkers, Strauss found that they understood themselves not as innovators, as did the moderns, but as conveyers of a tradition that went back to Plato and that they had only adapted the Platonic teaching to the Judaic and Islamic revelations. Plato, he heard, was the teacher of prophecy. What in the world that meant, he could not divine. So he turned to Plato, and it was by this route that he came to the ancients. His access to their thought was by way of medieval philosophy. He had, of course, had the classical education common in Germany and was possessed of the conventional wisdom about the ancients. But that education precisely had made the classics uninteresting to him, little more than learning or general culture. No more than any of his contemporaries would he have gone to the ancient philosophers to solve the real problems of his life. Everybody was sure that the most important issues had been settled against the ancients. Now, as his thought had been drawn backward in time by the force of his vital concerns, he discovered an inlet to ancient thought through which those concerns were addressed more fully than he had imagined they could be. The unexpected perspective on the Greek philosophers which had emerged from his original needs proved to be the authentic one, for the medieval thinkers, closer in time to the Greeks and still preoccupied with the same problems as were they, had a surer knowledge of them than did the scholars who had, unawares, adopted one version or another of the modern resolution of the religious question and were most generally easy-going atheists (as opposed to atheists who faced up to the real consequences of atheism).

Strauss discovered that Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Thucydides, as well as many others, wrote like the medieval thinkers who had pointed. in this direction. The execution of Socrates for impiety is the threshold to the Platonic world, and the investigation of philosophy's stance toward the gods is the beginning and end of those dialogues which are the supreme achievement of the ancient art of writing. Strauss found here the beginning

point from which we would "be open to the full impact of the all important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus.*"[2] The profound opposition between Jerusalem and Athens and the modern attempt to alter their relation—and he now knew that this was the hidden origin of modern philosophy—became the sole theme of his continuous meditation. He was thus able to get a synopsis of the permanent human alternatives; their permanence, he argued, constituted the decisive refutation of historicism.

On the basis of these reflections, we can distinguish roughly three phases in Leo Strauss' development. It was, let me repeat, a continuous, deepening process. First, there was what might be called the pre-Straussean Strauss, represented by *Spinoza's Critique of Religion, Philosophie und Gesetz* (the only one of his books not available in English) and *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*. These works treat of his immediate political-theological concerns as they first presented themselves to him. They are enormously learned and well argued books which have a form like that of the best modern books in intellectual history. Their contents, on further consideration, strain that form and lead to his later breaking out of it. But they follow the canons of modern scholarship and their historical premises. These books put Strauss' own questions to the authors; he has not yet learned to see their questions as they themselves saw them. He finds these thinkers more caused by than causing their times. He applies a standard of reality to them rather than learning reality from them. He brings influences to them which they did not recognize; and he does not see radical breaks in the tradition which he later came to see because he accepts contemporary periodizations of thought. He knows of Epicurean religious criticism, but not of Platonic. He is seeking a standpoint outside the modern, but he has not found it. In short, he does not yet know antiquity. It is no accident that the Hobbes book, the book he liked the least, remains the one most reputed and uncontroversial in the scholarly community.

The second phase is dominated by his discovery of esoteric writing, which is, as I have said, identical with his discovery of antiquity and hence of a real alternative. He looks around the world with a fresh eye. His writing is still akin to that of other scholars, but the conclusions begin to appear outrageous; the interpretations are far from common opinion and seem based on a perverse attention to detail. Three books come from this period, *Persecution and the Art of Writing, On Tyranny*, and *Natural Right and History*. The first book elaborates the general thesis about hidden

communication and gives detailed interpretations of medieval texts. The second is his first presentation of a Greek book. He chose Xenophon because Xenophon seems to us a fool but appeared wise to older thinkers. In making his wisdom palpable again, a measure of the difference between ancient and modern thought is established. Plato is always in high philosophic repute, for we can find in him themes akin to those still talked about today. But we are forced to neglect much more in him than we pay attention to. He is closer to Xenophon than he is to us, and until we understand Xenophon, we do not understand Plato. Xenophon is more alien to us, but more readily comprehensible, because he is really simpler and because we are not led astray by a misleading familiarity.

Natural Right and History provides a synthesis of Strauss' concerns and an unhistorical history of philosophy. He was beginning to see the outlines of ancient philosophy while constantly thinking of the modern alternatives and confronting them with the ancients. He could now present the classical meaning of nature and make plausible its use as a standard. Hence, he could see the intentions of the first modern philosophers who understood that view of nature and tried to provide a substitute for it. The later thinkers tried to resolve difficulties inherent in the new view or to improve on it. Those difficulties, made manifest, led not to the return to the older view but to the abandonment of nature in favor of history, which in its first stage seemed to preserve reason and provide another standard, but which culminated in the rejection of reason and the disappearance of any standard. He was always thinking of what he later called "the three waves of modernity": modern natural right, prepared by Machiavelli and developed by Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, and Locke; the crisis of modern natural right and the emergence of history, begun by Rousseau and elaborated by Kant and Hegel; radical historicism, begun by Nietzsche and culminating in Heidegger. Strauss was comprehensive, yet precise, grasping each of the stages at its roots and looking to the most concrete expressions of its intention. He tried to show that all the questions are still open, but that the progressive developments, and the hopes engendered by them, had obscured the alternatives in such a way as finally to make it appear that the perspective of history or cultural relativism is simply and without question superior. Each of the great waves began with a Greek inspiration, but these returns were only partial and ended in a radicalization of modernity. Strauss took on all comers on their own terms, addressed himself to the whole tradition.

The third phase is characterized by a complete abandonment of the form as well as the content of modern scholarship. Strauss no longer felt

bound to make any compromises or to see the texts through the screen of scholarly method and categories. He had liberated himself and could understand writers as they understood themselves. He talked with them as one would talk with a wise and subtle contemporary about the nature of things. The proof that he could do so is these late writings read in conjunction with those writings about which he wrote. Although their contents are extremely difficult for us to grasp, they are amazingly simple in form and expression, so much so that some might think, and some have actually thought, that he was an innocent who picked up the great books and read them as would an ordinary reader who was unaware that they are the preserve of an infinite number of scholars in a variety of disconnected disciplines who possess information without which one understands nothing of them. The distance between the naive reader's vision and that of the scholar is as great as the distance between the commonsense perception of the world and that of modern mathematical physics; so great is the distance that there remains almost no link between them. Strauss set about restoring the naive vision, which includes the belief that the truth is the important consideration in the study of a thinker, that the truth is eternal, that one can study an old writer as one would a contemporary and that the only concern is what is written, as opposed to its historical, economic, or psychological background. Strauss rather enjoyed the reputation for innocence, for it meant that he had in some measure succeeded in recovering the surface of things. He knew that innocence once lost is almost impossible to recover. The cries of indignation, insisting that what he was doing was impossible, gave him some hope. But what an effort of the mind it took to get back to the simple business of thinking about Plato and the others! He had to become aware that there was a problem; he had to spend years working through the conventional scholarly views; he had to confront the challenges posed by the great founders of the historical school and test the necessity of its emergence; he had to find a way of seeing the books under the debris and through eyes which had been rendered weak; he had somehow to have at the beginning an inkling of the ancient understanding of philosophy which he could only grasp at the end. The way to read books—so small a concern—is the point from which the problems of modern philosophy come into focus. On this question depends the freedom of the mind, both in the practical sense that he who does not know how to read can never investigate the human potential and, in the theoretical sense, that the answer to the question determines the nature and the limits of the human mind. Every sentence of these unprepossessing books is suffused with a tension deriving from the

difficulty of understanding men at the level of Plato and Machiavelli, the difficulty of beginning from a cave so different from the one in which they began and trying to find the common ground of rational discourse, and the difficulty posed by the powerful argument that there is no such common ground among ages and cultures. To repeat, Strauss' refutation of historicism consisted primarily in understanding the old philosophers as they understood themselves, rather than understanding them better than they understood themselves, as did rational historicism, or in light of a privileged horizon, as did radical historicism. To be able to reproduce that older thought in full awareness of the objections to it is to philosophize.

Strauss' writings of the first period were treated respectfully, as scholarly productions of a man with somewhat eccentric interests. Those of the second were considered perverse and caused anger. Those of the third period are ignored. They seem too far away from the way we look at things and the way we speak. But these books are the authentic, the great Strauss to which all the rest is only prolegomena. The early works reveal his search and his conversion and erect the scaffold for the structure he was to build. It is only in the later works that he made the concrete analyses of phenomena, elaborated the rich detail of political life and discovered the possible articulations of the soul. He was able to do without most abstractions and to make those readers who were willing to expend the effort look at the world around them and see things afresh. He presented things, not generalizations about things. He never repeated himself and always began anew although he was always looking at the same things. To see this, one need only read the chapter on the *Republic* in *The City and Man* and observe what he learned about *thymos* and *eros* as well as about *techne* in what must have been his fiftieth careful reading of the *Republic.* He was now truly at grips with his subject matter.

Strauss began this group of writings with *Thoughts on Machiavelli.* He found Machiavelli to be the fountainhead of modern thought and the initiator of the first truly radical break with the Platonic-Aristotelian political philosophy. From here, through the eyes of a man who really understood the ancients, he could most clearly see how they appeared to the founder of the modern project, in both its political and scientific aspects, and precisely to what Machiavelli objected in them; he could thus see what Machiavellis' innovation was. Then came *The City and Man,* which moved from Aristotle to Plato to Thucydides, from the fully developed classical teaching to its problematic formulation to the pre-philosophic world out of which it emerged and which it replaced. This enabled him to see what philosophy originally meant and what the city

was before it was reinterpreted for the sake of philosophy.) The first of these two books was his final statement on the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. The second was his attempt to reconstruct not precisely the quarrel between revelation and reason, but the quarrel between the divine city and the natural one, the most notable incident of which was the execution of Socrates. It is to be remarked that in *The City and Man* he, a man of over sixty who had studied Plato intensely for thirty years, permitted himself for the first time to publish an interpretation of a Platonic dialogue.

The next three books were devoted to Socrates by way of studies of Aristophanes and Xenophon, the poet who understood and accused Socrates versus the student who defended him. I need not say how fresh this approach was and what a new Socrates Strauss found for us in contemplating the old Socrates. Strauss looked, as no one else would today, for the obvious and simple way for a man of delicate perception to grasp Socrates again and see if he could ever charm us as he charmed Alcibiades and Plato. Compared to this representation, all modern studies of Socrates, including Nietzsche's, are *fables convenus.*

Finally, his last book, to be published soon by the University of Chicago Press, written in his seventies, was his first book on Plato, an interpretation of Plato's last book, the *Laws*, the dialogue which Avicenna said was the standard book on prophecy and which Strauss said was the book on the philosopher in the real city, implying that the two are really one.

Strauss told me a few weeks before he died that there were many things he still would want to do if his health were not failing. And, surely, with him went a store of the most useful knowledge. But it seems to me, now that I reflect on it, that he accomplished what he set out to do.

IV

A final word on the way Leo Strauss wrote. For those who admire gain or want to influence the world's events, his career is a disappointment. Only a tiny number of men who did not fall under the spell of his personal charm were profoundly affected by his books. He was reproached by some of his friends and admirers for not speaking in the language and the accents of current discourse; for he knew so much and had so many unusual perspectives that he could have become one of the celebrated men of the age and furthered the causes that interested him. Instead, what he

wrote was at once unprepossessing and forbidding. He neither spoke to the taste of the age nor tried to create a new taste. His retreat from the stage of literary glory cannot be attributed either to scholarly dryness, to a lack of understanding of poetry, or to an incapacity to write beautifully and powerfully. His passion and his literary gifts are undeniable. Goethe was one of his masters, and it was no accident that he understood Aristophanes better than did Aristophanes' official keepers. Strauss' books contain many sentences and paragraphs of astonishing beauty and force, and in an essay such as his response to Kojève one can see a rare public indulgence of his rhetorical skills. His lack of popularity was an act of will rather than a decree of fate.

The reasons for this decision, insofar as I can penetrate them, are three. First and foremost, Leo Strauss was a philosopher, and as with every other facet of the complex impression made by this unusual being, it is to this simple fact that his choice of literary form can be traced. He often repeated Hegel's saying that philosophy must avoid trying to be edifying. He was primarily concerned with finding out for himself and only secondarily with communicating what he found out, lest the demands of communication determine the results of the quest. His apparent selfishness in this regard was his mode of benefaction, for there is no greater or rarer gift than intransigent dedication to the truth. The beauty, he was persuaded, was there for a certain kind of man capable of a certain kind of labor. The words must reflect the inner beauty of the thought and not the external tastes of the literary market, especially in an unusually untheoretical age. In converting philosophy into nonphilosophy for the sake of an audience, no matter what other benefits might be achieved, one would lose the one thing most needed. He once said of a particularly famous intellectual that he never wrote a sentence without looking over his shoulder. Of Strauss, it can be said that he never wrote one while doing so. But he is not particularly to be commended for that, for it was never a temptation for him to do so.

Second, Strauss was acutely aware of the abuses to which the public expression of philosophy is subject. Philosophy is dangerous for it must always call everything into question while in politics not everything can be called into question. The peculiar horror of modern tyranny has been its alliance with perverted philosophy. Strauss no less and perhaps more than any man was susceptible to the enchantment of the rhetoric of Rousseau and Nietzsche, but he also saw to what extent the passions they aroused and the deceptive sense of understanding they engendered could damage the cause of decency as well as that of philosophy. Aristotle or Maimonides could never provide the inspiration or the justification for a

tyrant. They were no less radical, but their voices were softer and attracted less dangerous passions while abandoning excessive hopes. Rousseau was not the cause of the Terror nor Nietzsche of the Nazis, but there was something in what they said and the way they said it which made it possible for them to be misinterpreted in certain politically relevant ways. Strauss, with his respect for speech and its power, believed that men are responsible for what they say. And it was not entirely an accident of personality that Heidegger, who most of all contemporaries attracted a cult by brave talk, not only prepared the atmosphere for Hitler but eagerly enlisted his rhetoric in Hitler's cause.

This leads to the third reason, which has to do with Strauss' observations of the differences between ancient and modern philosophy. Modern philosophy hoped to ensure the union of philosophy and the city or to rationalize politics. The modern philosopher was also literally a ruler and a reformer; he therefore became much more involved in and dependent on politics. He was first the bringer of enlightenment, then the leader of revolution; finally, the whole destiny of man and even nature was his responsibility. Modern writings were public teachings, even manifestos and party programs. Ancient writings had a much more modest intention, grounded on the opinion that politics must always be less than rational, that reason must protect itself, and that there is only a tiny number of men who can potentially philosophize and hence understand the teachings of philosophy. There is an interest of philosophy, one not identical to that of any possible regime, and that is what a philosopher must defend. Ancient philosophy had a rhetoric too, but one limited to three intentions. the preservation of what was known for those who could know it and against those who would adapt it to the needs of the time; the attracting of the few who could know to a life of knowing and the discouraging of others; and the procuring of a good reputation for philosophy in order to ensure its toleration within the various regimes as they came and went. Strauss believed the ancient view was correct and learned to write as he read. Our special circumstances required a reminder of the severe discipline of philosophy and its distance from popular taste. Strauss had no great hopes. He left his works as resources for those who might experience the need to study the tradition, begging no one and condescending to no one. He thought it possible that philosophy might disappear utterly from the world, although he thought nature supported it. He did his best by finding out what philosophy is and by trying to tell others. At most he hoped there might someday be a third humanism, or renaissance, after those of Italy and Germany, but this time inspired neither by the visual beauty of

the Greeks' statues, paintings, and buildings nor by the grandeur of their poetry, but by the truth of their philosophy. He provided the bridge from modernity to antiquity which would help this new beginning. But he never believed he could reform humankind.

Strauss' taste always led him to look at the simple, the ordinary, and the superficial. He said that only by the closest attention to the surface could one get to the core; he also said the surface is the core. It was partly a gentleman's restraint that caused him to prefer Jane Austen to Dostoyevsky, but it was more that her reserve, sensibleness, and apparent attention only to the nice things permitted the deeper and more dangerous things to emerge in their proper proportions. He detested the pose of profundity and that combination of sentimentality and brutality which constituted contemporary taste, not from any moralism but because they are philistine and boring. Most of all, he detested moral indignation, because it is a form of self-indulgence, and it distorts the mind. All of this led him to delight in Xenophon, who appeared to be the bluff retired army colonel with endless stories of the events he participated in and of the men he knew but to the level of whom he never attained, yet who really dominated with his graceful irony those who through the ages have thought they were subtle. This was the writer who presented us with the liberal Cyrus and let us figure out for ourselves what Machiavelli tells us: that there are two forms of liberality, one practised with one's own property and one practised with other people's property, and that Cyrus specialized exclusively in the latter form. The discovery of such an intriguing, enigmatic writer was a way of entering into an alien world of thought that Strauss preferred to the well-traveled roads which are probably of our construction. He preferred the commonplace and neglected, because that is where he could get a firm grasp on things rather than words. He learned Xenophon before he learned Plato, and when he wanted to understand Plato he studied the *Minos* or the *Apology* rather than the *Parmenides* or the *Philebus*, not because he was not interested in the *ideas* but precisely because he was.

Thus, the books of his ripeness are almost as alien to us as are the books with which he dealt. I recently re-read *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and realized that it is not at all a book as we ordinarily understand a book. If one sits down and reads it as one reads a treatise, its contents are guarded by seven seals; it provides us with a few arid generalizations that look like oases in a sandy desert. But the book is really a way of life, a sort of philosophy kit. First one must know Machiavelli's text very well and have it constantly in hand. And as soon as one gets acquainted with Machiavelli,

one sees that he cannot be understood without knowing Livy's text very well. One must first read it on its own and try to form a Livian interpretation of Livy, and then let Machiavelli act as one's guide in order to arrive at a Machiavellian interpretation of Livy. It is in our coming to the awareness of the difference between these two interpretations that one gets one's first inkling of what Machiavelli is about. On the way one is forced to become involved in concrete details that take time and reflection. For example, Machiavelli's shockingly witty remark about Hannibal's "inhuman cruelty and other virtues" only takes on its full significance from the fact that it is based on a passage in Livy where he discusses Hannibal's strange mixture of virtues and vices; according to Livy Hannibal's major vice was his "inhuman cruelty." This is only a sample of an infinity of such charming and illuminating details which, when put in order, constitute a concrete, as opposed to an abstract, consciousness of the political phenomenon. Then one realizes that Strauss' book bears the same relation to Machiavelli's book as does Machiavelli's book to Livy's book. The complexity of Strauss' undertaking is mind-boggling; it is not a complexity born of the desire to obfuscate; it is a mirror of reality. One must come to know Machiavelli's enormous cast of characters—Brutus, Fabius, David, Cesare Borgia, Ferdinand of Aragon, and so on—and be interested in their action and see the problems they represent. One must care about them as one cares about the persons in a novel. Then one can begin to generalize seriously. And Machiavelli and Livy will not do, for Machiavelli points us to Xenophon, Tacitus, Cicero, the Bible, and many other writers. One must constantly stop, consult another text, try to penetrate another character, and walk around the room and think. One must use a pencil and paper, make lists, and count. It is an unending task, one that continually evokes that wonder at what previously seemed commonplace which Aristole says is the origin of philosophy. One learns what it means to live with books; one is forced to make them a part of one's experience and life. When one returns to Strauss' book, after having left it under his guidance, it suddenly becomes as gripping as the dénouement of a drama. As one is drawn through the matter by the passion to make sense of what has involved one for so long, suddenly there appears a magic formula which pierces the clouds like the sun to illuminate a gorgeous landscape. The distance between the appearance of this book and its reality is amazing. It is a possession for life.

What the fate of these books will be, I do not know. Those who have lived with them over a period of many years have been changed as were Glaucon and Adeimantus by the night they spent with Socrates. They

learned the splendors of a kind of soul and a way of life which nothing in their experience would have revealed to them. They returned to political life, still ordinary men—for nature cannot be changed. But, since politics has as its goal the encouragement of the best possible life, they returned with a radically altered perspective, with new expectations and prayers. For the rest, I cannot help but believe that Leo Strauss' writings, even if their broader implications are not grasped, will exercise a powerful influence on the future. They are such a rich lode of interpretations of books still of concern that they will, due to the poverty of the competition, attract the young. Willy-nilly, political scientists, intellectual historians, medievalists, classicists, literary critics, and, last of all, professors of philosophy, will find that they have to use his terms and his interpretations, that they will continually, with more or less good will, have to respond to questions outside their conventions, and that they will have to face the apostasy of their best students. Echoing the *Apology* with what will seem a threat to some, a blessing to others, I believe our generation may well be judged by the next generation according to how we judged Leo Strauss.

NOTES

1. If one wishes to see the development of Strauss' thought through his studies, it would be well to compare the "Preface to the English Edition" of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Shocken, New York, 1965) with the book itself.

2. *The City and Man* (Rand McNally, Chicago, 1964).